

Santa Barbara Symphony

## 70th Season Finale

## Mendelssohn &amp; Milestones

Review by Daniel Kepl / VOICE

**T**HE SANTA BARBARA SYMPHONY WOUND DOWN ITS 70TH CONCERT SEASON LAST WEEKEND at the Granada Theatre with a program that remembered the recent past with a fresh performance of Jonathan Leshnoff's *Concerto Grosso*, premiered here as a Santa Barbara Symphony commission in 2013, continued with an old friend as soloist, violinist Philippe Quint playing Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64*, and burned the barn down with a stunning performance of Brahms' *Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68*. Platinum sounds, indeed.

Music and Artistic Director Nir Kabaretti, who conducted the premiere of Jonathan Leshnoff's *Concerto Grosso* ten years ago, gave the work new life and meaning at last Sunday's performance. In four movements and featuring the principal players of the orchestra as soloists in various combinations, *Concerto Grosso* has aged beautifully. A modern work cloaked in

Baroque structure and etiquette, the first movement featured two solo violins, Jessica Guideri (concertmaster) and Ryo Usami (principal second). With Kabaretti chaperoning, the two blended together beautifully in their various exchanges, while the orchestra chattered approval, punctuating the discourse from time to time with pithy orchestral commentary.

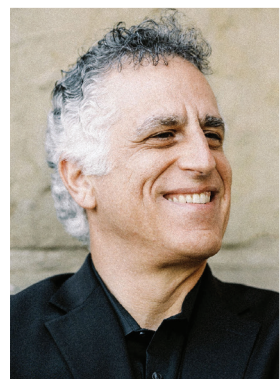


Photo by Zach Mendez

Maestro Nir Kabaretti

The second movement highlighted the virtuosity of principal horn (Teag Reaves), principal trumpet (Jon Lewis), principal trombone (Dillon MacIntyre), principal cello (Trevor Handy), and harpsichord (principal pianist Natasha Kislenko). Leshnoff has composed a delicious mood mash-up for this movement. Quasi-Baroque sentiment, semi-Andalusian color, and Hindemith-like tidiness rewarded the listener with a plethora of little bonuses, like the lovely unison passagework that melded muted trumpet and cello colors, or the magical opening solo cello

figure that cast a spell over the entire movement. Marvelous.

The third section of *Concerto Grosso* featured principal winds – Amy Tatum (flute), Lara Wickes (oboe), Don Foster (clarinet), and Andy Radford (bassoon), with a touch of harp for added lightness (Michelle Temple). Leshnoff's color palette for the orchestral support team included besides harp, mallet percussion (xylophone), and other feathery orchestral punctuations to enhance the delicate yet glittery passages for the ensemble of wind soloists. Marvelous and imaginative orchestration.

With the re-appearance on stage of the two violin soloists, the last movement presented a grand finale for all eleven soloists and orchestra. What a difference ten years of artistic growth can make. I remember the premiere in 2013, a rather head-in-the-music affair like most premieres. Last Sunday's performance danced with energy, color, and bright optimism; a tribute to the orchestra's ensemble cohesion and growth over the past decade under Nir Kabaretti's steady helm.

It's always a treat to welcome special friends of the Santa Barbara Symphony back for important occasions, and the 70th anniversary of our orchestra's founding (1953) was perfect for a return visit by violinist Philippe Quint, who knocked Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto in E minor, Op. 64* out of the concert hall ballpark. Rapport is everything when jointly discerning the minutia of a profound and emotionally complicated work. The Quint/Kabaretti collusion was an exercise in mind-bending intellectual as well as musical exhilaration. Quint's big, sometimes deliberately raw sound during various machinations in the first movement, *Allegro molto appassionato*, made it clear his interpretation would be hefty. It worked.

Quint's intensely personal approach to the cadenza at the end of the first movement confirmed his appropriately meditative approach to the work as a whole; a sincere understanding of the many years of angst involved in the concerto's creation. A mysterious sustained solo bassoon tone shifts the mood and segues the concerto into its second movement, *Andante*, a unique effect that itself was revolutionary compositionally, for the period. Quint/Kabaretti made full use of this suspended energy, commencing a steadily relentless forward movement that eventually crashed into the third movement, *Allegretto non troppo-Allegro Molto Vivace*, as if time were of the essence. The composer died prematurely within two years of the concerto's debut. A beautiful and extensive solo narrative cadenza before the concerto's exciting frenetic coda found Quint, Kabaretti, and the orchestra caught up in a fervid embrace. The concerto danced through its exhilarating last bars. Massive applause Sunday, resulted in a solo fiddle encore, the *Adagio* from the *Unaccompanied Violin Sonata No. 1, in G minor (BWV 1001)*.

Maestro Kabaretti's programming *raison d'être* for this last pair of concerts of the season was "concerto." A concerto for his principal players (Leshnoff), a concerto for a favorite guest artist (Mendelssohn), and to end the concert, Brahms' *Symphony No. 1 in C minor, Op. 68*,

arguably a concerto for orchestra. Speaking of puzzles to unravel and put back together again, the *Symphony No. 1* is monumental in its hints, mysteries, and secrets. Mendelssohn struggled with his *Violin Concerto* for about eight years before he was satisfied. So too Brahms, who worked on, doubted, revised, fretted over, but finally allowed to surface publicly after 20 years of creative struggle. Little wonder. The *Symphony No. 1* is an enigma. Stunningly beautiful, an enormous soundscape, its four restless movements a virtuoso challenge for orchestra and conductor alike.

Revealing at least some of its sub-basements, Kabaretti and the orchestra explored Brahms' darkest intimations, his sometimes over-the-top longings, his resignations, and apotheoses. Magnificent playing, brilliant conducting, and several musical revelations this listener has never noticed, produced a performance Sunday that brought the house to its feet.

Mark your calendar. The Santa Barbara Symphony will present a special concert on Thursday, June 15th at the Granada, *An Evening with Sinatra*, featuring tribute artist Tony DeSare, Kabaretti, and the orchestra in an evening devoted to "ol' blue eyes."

www.thesymphony.org

Photo by John Gress

Philippe Quint



Daniel Kepl has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews or Santa Barbara publications since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor.

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